

## Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine

# AVMA Vice President Candidates Discuss Mentoring and How to Advocate for Veterinary Students

By Dr. Donald F. Smith  
July 22, 2014

I recently posted interviews with the two AVMA president candidates, Drs. Larry Dee and Joseph Kinnarney.<sup>1</sup> Today's story is a follow up on the other officer election that will be decided by the House of Delegates (HOD) July 25<sup>th</sup>, preceding the annual convention in Denver. An earlier interview conducted by AVMA staff was reported in the July 15, 2014, issue of the JAVMA, and also on line.<sup>2</sup>

Email responses to four questions I posed to the two candidates, Dr. Rebecca Stinson and Dr. Mark Russak, are below.

***Regarding Mentoring: The concept of mentoring has received a great deal of attention recently. What are your thoughts about mentoring programs for veterinary students, especially as it relates to seeking support and advice from those outside the traditional veterinary college environment?***

**Dr. Mark Russak:**

Mentoring means very different things to different people....From improving veterinary technical skills to personal and professional finance success, as well as, life balance and satisfaction. I believe there is room for various modes of mentoring because it is not just about veterinary medicine but it is about being the best you can be professionally and personally. So far, long distance mentoring has not proven to be very successful. There is nothing like a one on one conversation and a personal relationship. Over the last several years I have worked closely with AAHA and Vet Partners in developing a hands on mentoring program and toolkit... This is goal orientated, measurable and flexible for the mentors and the mentee. I truly believe this will be the answer to true mentorship in Veterinary Medicine. This is the link: <https://mentorship.aahanet.org/>. I am proud to have been an integral part developing of this toolkit over the last several years.

**Dr. Rebecca Stinson:**

I am a firm believer in the concept of mentorship. During my years of being active in organized veterinary medicine, I have seen many organizational models come and go within AVMA and through other groups including state

VMAs, and AAEP. I have learned from these experiences that a mentor is often a moving target. The truly great mentors in our lives are often the ones that have identified themselves as mentors. These are the people who have invited me to visit their practice or other work environment, have invited me to become involved in AVMA, state associations, etc. Mentorship changes constantly and our mentors for different phases of life will change as well. Many of us will find one mentor who helps with career decisions and someone completely different who can offer advice on balancing personal and work opportunities. The role of organized veterinary medicine will hopefully be to continue to expand the database of people that you have the opportunity to interact with in a meaningful way. This will allow people to continue to form relationships that will help them throughout careers and life. A mentor may not have to be around the corner but they will let you know that they are always there when you need them.

***Regarding Women's Leadership in the AVMA: You are both well aware of the gender makeup of the AVMA leadership, whether in the House of Delegates, the Executive Board, or the AVMA senior staff. Please comment about the current composition of the senior AVMA leadership (voluntary and staff), and discuss how you would address many students' concerns about the fact that the leadership profile and the student profile appears so different to them.***

**Dr. Mark Russak:**

It is obvious that the current leadership of AVMA does not *YET* reflect what our profession physically looks like.....but it is changing. Leadership positions require our leaders to have time and experience so it is not surprising how our current leadership has appeared until recently. In the past several years, the gender shift has been occurring rapidly within the profession and I contend women are moving into more leadership positions. They are starting to catch up. For example, in one major veterinary organization, the current AAHA board of directors is composed 7 women and 1 man and it is a young board. This was not done by chance or through affirmative action it was done by proactively seeking the BEST and most competent persons for the position. It so happens that women were the best fit. Competency is always the key to a successful organization. AVMA must proactively pursue and welcome all competent potential leaders regardless of gender. It will not be long before the AVMA leadership reflects the appearance of all of our profession. This will be the natural progression that we are already starting to see.

**Dr. Rebecca Stinson:**

This is a challenging question. When we look at the current makeup of the AVMA Executive Board, we see three women effective in July with one of those a staff member, one a non-voting but powerful position, and a newly

elected District Director. The AVMA continues to become more accessible to women interested in leadership roles and if you look at the committee and council structure, you will note a substantial number of wonderful female leaders rising through the current leadership models. Similarly, the House of Delegates is predominantly male but continues to change in its makeup with each passing year. I feel that the organization needs to continue to foster new leaders from all demographics and seek out ways to increase involvement by women as well as several other cohorts. Additionally, the AVMA will need to continue to strive to keep leadership roles relevant to the next generations of veterinarians by being mentors and reaching out to those around us in our profession and helping the future leaders to see the rewards from being involved. I hope that by being a woman working to be involved in leadership of AVMA that I may help to influence another generation to become involved and take the opportunity to continue to move the organization forward for the generations after.

***Regarding the Current Role of Vice President: Some perceive the VP role to involve a great deal of time and effort in travel to veterinary colleges). Nonetheless, travel is often considered an impediment when people consider becoming candidates for the position. While you are both fully committed to this investment of time and effort, is there perhaps a different way—a better way perhaps—to fashion the position so that your successors can be selected from the broadest possible range of qualified candidates?***

**Dr. Mark Russak:**

I have been traveling to Veterinary Colleges for the last 5 years plus. I have logged over one quarter of a million air miles in the last 2½ years. I know and understand the rigors of travel. I am young at heart, and in great physical health. I retired young and I am a widower so I have all of the time needed to handle this position. This will be my FULL TIME JOB. That being said, in today's technologically advanced world there are multiple ways of delivering messages, webinars, podcasts, social media etc. etc. They all have their place but there is nothing like communicating in a face to face conversation through interactive presentations. I have developed numerous personal and long lasting relationships with young veterinarians throughout the country and it would have been difficult to cultivate credibility and trust without face to face interaction. This is a very dynamic position and I believe any candidate for this position understands the commitment necessary to fulfill the requirements and objectives of AVMA Vice President.

**Dr. Rebecca Stinson:**

Although I recognize that we have great opportunities to increase contact with others via non-traditional means, I do feel that having a personal interaction at the schools continues to be important. During my work on the Task Force on Governance, potential retooling of the position was given a lot

of consideration. We had a large amount of feedback from the students that they felt that the volunteer leader visit was essential in keeping AVMA in touch with the students around the country and at the chapters beyond our borders and the Associate group at St. Matthews. Additionally, we need to continue to interact with the faculty at the colleges to understand the unique expectations they have of the organization. I think that we can continue to strive to improve the level of interaction by potentially adding some virtual visits in addition to the one in person visit to each school. The SCAVMA president networking opportunities seem to act as an added means to keep the schools aware of challenges one another are facing and help this new generation of veterinarians realize how much we have in common regardless of where we reside. It may be possible to improve the distribution of travel having additional volunteer leaders share in the role of the in-person visit.

***Regarding the Potential for Student Impact: Today's students are bright, passionate, committed and have boundless energy. In the position as Vice President, how could you help students reach their full capacity having an impact on the future of veterinary medicine? More specifically, please identify one significant challenge that students face today, and share how you might advise them how they could go about finding a solution to the problem, either individually or collectively.***

**Dr. Mark Russak:**

I believe the most significant challenge for our veterinary students and young associates is the debt to salary ratio in the current job market. It is not sustainable. Our young DVMs have no control over many of the factors that are contributing to this challenge. The best way to overcome this is taking the opportunity to become a highly productive veterinarian as soon as possible. This is a win- win- win....more productivity with client adherence equals efficiency and higher income for the associate, the practice and better medical care for the patients. Large or small animal, client bonding and trust is the key to successful practice. Most veterinary schools are not teaching or placing enough emphasis in this area. Curriculums are full and it is difficult to find time in the curriculum for non-technical skills.....what I call success skills. It was my mantra in private practice and this is what I was teaching during my time in academia and what I have been teaching in my seminars for many years. I have seen the positive impact it has had on student careers and success. I hope to continue sharing this information with students as AVMA Vice President.

**Dr. Rebecca Stinson:**

The opportunities for students to impact the future of veterinary medicine continue to expand almost daily. Students are asked to participate on several leadership entities at AVMA including Councils, committees and Task

Forces. The AVMA PAC has also opened up opportunities for students to have a voice and participate in the Advocacy on behalf of the membership. Students who have participated in these volunteer roles or in the AVMA externship programs have often been very excited to see that the individual can have even in an organization as large and diverse as AVMA. I would like to take the opportunity during school visits to introduce not only my story of being engaged but also those of other volunteer leaders from the region. The make up of our leadership is only as good as the people who are willing to step forward.

Doubtlessly, the largest challenge for students today is the concern for financial stability. A potential solution may be to work to reconsider pre-requisites for admission to include some basic business education in at least personal financial planning and management. This could be potentially be addressed through the Economic Division in combination with the Council on Education and the AAVMC. Having a basic understanding prior to entering veterinary school may help students to carefully evaluate the debt they are taking on and the process of contract negotiation. Although this alone is unlikely to correct the difficult financial picture, it may help to start to chip away at the problem.

Lastly, I would like to speak to all of my colleagues, current and future, and say thank you for counting me as a part of this profession. I feel blessed every day that I can always say that I AM a VETERINARIAN.

On behalf of all of the readers of [www.veritasdvmblog.com](http://www.veritasdvmblog.com), I extend my sincere thanks and appreciation to both Dr. Russak and Dr. Stinson.

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<sup>1</sup> Smith, Donald F. AVMA Presidential Candidates Discuss Governance, Future Scope of the Profession and Advocacy. *Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine*, July 7, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Nolen, R. Scott (interviews). [“The next AVMA vice president. Russak and Stinson explain they’re up for the job.”](#) *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*. July 15, 2014. 245(2).

#### KEYWORDS:

American Veterinary Medical Association  
Rebecca Stinson  
Mark Russak  
Vice President  
Mentors  
Mentoring  
Governance  
Women in Veterinary Medicine  
House of Delegates

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Executive Board

TOPIC:

American Veterinary Medical Association

LEADING QUESTION:

What two veterinarians are running for VP for 2014-15?

META-SUMMARY:

Drs. Rebecca Stinson and Mark Russak are interviewed for the position of AVMA Vice President

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Donald F. Smith, Dean Emeritus of the Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine, had a passion for the value of the history of veterinary medicine as a gateway for understanding the present and the future of the profession.

Throughout his many professional roles from professor of surgery, to Department Chair of Clinical Sciences, Associate Dean of Education and of Academic Programs and Dean, he spearheaded changes in curriculum, clinical services, diagnostic services and more. He was a diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Surgeons and a member of the National Academy of Practices. Most recently he played a major role in increasing the role of women in veterinary leadership.

*Perspectives in Veterinary Medicine* is one of his projects where he was able to share his vast knowledge of the profession.